

PSALM 22 IN SYRIAC TRADITION¹

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I. Introduction

That “the Church is not afraid of scientific criticism” of the Bible, as John Paul II put it, is due largely to the patient labors of Catholic exegetes of previous generations.² Contemporary Catholic exegetes owe them a debt of gratitude. What is at issue currently is not fear, but relevance or promise. Brian Daley, S. J. has recently observed that there is a growing sense among Biblical scholars and theologians that

the dominant post-Enlightenment approach to identifying the meaning of Biblical texts has begun to lose some of its energy, that it has less of substance to say than once it did to those who want to spend their time reading the Christian Bible: the members, by and large, of the Christian Churches.³

Biblical scholarship that uses the text of the Bible primarily as a source for recovering the culture and religion of ancient Israel is useful in itself as an academic discipline, but is of limited usefulness to theology. It simply fails to go far enough or to ask many important questions. Biblical exegetes too often adopt the model of the technician, explaining a text’s pre-history and its meaning for its original audience, resolving its historical problems, but failing to penetrate beyond the words to the realities mediated by the text. In other words, we fail to treat the

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- 1 An earlier version of this paper, prepared for the symposium on “Syriac and Antiochene Exegesis and Biblical Interpretation in the Church” held at Mount St. Mary’s Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland on June 15, 2004, was published in Robert D. Miller, ed., *Syriac and Antiochian Exegesis and Biblical Theology for the 3rd Millennium* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2008), 189–221.
 - 2 Pope John Paul II, “Address on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” (April 23, 1993), 4, in *The Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1993), 11–24, at 14. The Holy Father goes on to add: “She distrusts only preconceived opinions that claim to be based on science, but which in reality surreptitiously cause science to depart from its domain.”
 - 3 Brian E. Daley, S.J., “Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?: Reflections on Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms,” *Communio* 29 (2002): 185–216, at 186. A slightly different form of Daley’s paper appeared with the same title in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, eds. Ellen Davis and Richard Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 69–88. See also his recent reflections on this topic in Brian Daley, S.J., “Christ, the Church, and the Shape of Scripture: What We Can Learn from Patristic Exegesis,” in *From Judaism to Christianity: Tradition and Transition, A Festschrift for Thomas H. Tobin, S.J., on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 136, ed. Patricia Walters (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 267–288.

text theologically, as Scripture, as the living Word of God.⁴ Andrew Louth has correctly observed that when dealing with Scripture we deal not “with a technique for solving problems but with an art for discerning mystery.”⁵

On another level, the historical-critical method is sometimes alleged by its ardent proponents to be able to determine the meaning of a biblical text in such a way that other, figural readings are necessarily excluded.⁶ The hegemony of this method can at times be as limiting and as theologically restrictive as some of the rigidly Christological programs of the patristic and medieval periods that denied to the Old Testament any literal or contextual meaning apart from Christ. That biblical texts can have more than one level of meaning is a basic tenet of Christian interpretation. Saint Augustine puts it this way: “So, while one may say, ‘Moses meant what I think,’ and another, ‘No, he meant what I think,’ I think, for myself, it is more religious to say this: why did he not mean both, if both are true?”⁷ The historical-critical methods go a long way in helping to determine if an interpretation is true, but they are not the sole arbiters of the truth of Scripture.

In 1988 Cardinal Ratzinger called for the development of a new exegetical method that would be of greater relevance to the Church.⁸ Tentatively labeled “Method C” exegesis, it would take advantage of the strengths of both the patristic-medieval exegetical approach, Method A, and the modern historical-critical approach, Method B, while remaining cognizant of the shortcomings of both.⁹ In a study of Psalm 22 published in *The Thomist* in 2002, Gregory Vall offered a

4 For a discussion of the theological task of exegesis see Augustine Di Noia, O.P. and Bernard Mulcahy, O.P., “The Authority of Scripture in Sacramental Theology: Some Methodological Observations,” *Pro Ecclesia* 10 (2001): 329–345, especially 339–340.

5 Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery, An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 113.

6 See Daley’s discussion of Joseph Fitzmyer’s position in Daley, “Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?” 192–194.

7 Augustine, *Confessions*, xxxi. 42, as translated and cited in Daley, “Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?” 199. Similarly Luke Timothy Johnson and William Kurz, S.J. (*The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship, A Constructive Conversation* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002]) identify inclusive both/and thinking to be characteristic of Catholic biblical interpretation.

8 See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today,” in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed., Richard J. Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 1–23, here 6. This essay was first presented as the Erasmus Lecture delivered by Cardinal Ratzinger at St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, New York City, on January 27, 1988.

9 The source of this terminology is a roundtable discussion with Cardinal Ratzinger summarized in Paul T. Stallsworth, “The Story of an Encounter,” in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed., Richard J. Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 102–190, here 107–108. See also the more recent discussion in Gregory Vall, “Psalm 22: Vox Christi or Israelite Temple Liturgy?” *The Thomist* 66 (2002): 175–200, here 175–176. The terms Exegesis A, B, and C, were suggested only provisionally for the purposes of discussion and have not gained currency in theological scholarship nor, to the best of my knowledge, has Pope Benedict XVI used them in his later writings.

test case for Method C exegesis.¹⁰ I am sympathetic to the aims of this project and to Vall's specific contribution using Psalm 22 as a test case. Method C, as Vall envisioned it, would also take into consideration approaches that do not fall neatly under Methods A or B, namely Jewish interpretation and newer literary methodologies such as narrative criticism.

In this paper I would like to build on Vall's study and ask if the tradition of Syriac Old Testament commentary has anything to add to Method C exegesis as described by Ratzinger and developed by Vall. In formulating the topic in this way I hope to offer a preliminary and modest contribution toward answering the question whether Syriac biblical commentary can contribute to the apparent impasse in biblical scholarship between historical criticism and a desire for theological relevance. After a brief survey of the reception of Psalm 22 in the Syrian Orient, focusing primarily on the tradition of Syriac Old Testament commentary, I will suggest several areas in which this tradition might contribute to the project described by Cardinal Ratzinger.

II. Psalm 22 in Syriac Translation and in Syriac Tradition

Psalm 22 in Syriac Translation

The two most important Syriac translations of the Psalter are the Peshitta and the Syro-Hexapla. According to Michael Weitzman, the Peshitta Psalter was translated from Hebrew into Syriac by a small Jewish community in the late second century AD with only occasional reference to the Greek.¹¹ The Syro-Hexapla, a translation from Greek into Syriac, is ascribed to Paul of Tella and dated to A.D. 615–617.¹²

Although a full catalog of the ways in which these translations differ from the Hebrew Masoretic text and from our modern English translations is not possible in this context, I shall note a few of the readings that are important in understanding the later Syriac commentary tradition.¹³

10 Vall, "Psalm 22."

11 Michael Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament, An Introduction* (Cambridge, 1999). See also idem, "The Peshitta Psalter and its Hebrew Vorlage," *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (1985): 341–354. Similar conclusions are reached by Jerome Lund, "Grecisms in the Peshitta Psalms," in *The Peshitta as a Translation: Papers read at the II Peshitta Symposium, Leiden, 19–21 August 1993*, eds. Piet B. Dirksen and Arie van der Kooij, Monographs of the Peshitta Institute 8 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 85–102.

12 On the Syro-Hexapla see Robert J.V. Hiebert, "The 'Syrohexaplaric' Psalter: Its Text and Textual History," in *Der Septuaginta-Psalter und seine Tochterübersetzungen*, [The Septuagint Psalter and its Daughter Versions] eds. Anneli Aejmelaeus and Udo Quast, *Mitteilungen des Septuaginta-Unternehmens* XXIV (Göttingen, 2000), 123–146.

13 For a full discussion of the differences between the Greek and Hebrew versions of Psalm 22 see Gilles Dorival "La Bible grecque des Septante et le texte massorétique," [The Greek Bible of the Seventy and the Masoretic Text] in *David, Jésus et la reine Esther, Recherches sur le Psaume*

While the Hebrew title to Psalm 22 reads, "For the leader; according to "The deer of the dawn." A psalm of David," (NABRE) the Syriac tradition has several alternative titles. A representative title used in the East Syrian tradition reads: "It is said by David by way of a prayer when he was persecuted by Absalom."¹⁴ This title, which may stem from Theodore of Mopsuestia, indicates the basic historical approach of the traditional East Syrian interpretive tradition. It should be noted, however, that an alternative East Syrian title found in the Denha commentary adds that "others" understand the psalm to speak "about Christ our Lord."¹⁵

The Syro-Hexapla Psalter tended to include the Greek titles. The Syriac commentary attributed to Athanasius of Alexandria directly translates the Greek title: "To the end for morning help, a psalm of David."¹⁶ West Syrian commentary follows Greek tradition in interpreting this title Christologically to refer to both the epiphany, when the morning light of the redeemer shone forth, and to the morning of the resurrection, when Christ rose from the dead at the break of dawn. Another West Syrian title combines both the historical and Christological interpretive traditions in reading: "Of David. When his persecutors mocked him, and about the passion of our Lord and the cry of the nations."¹⁷

There are three readings in the Syriac that are significant for our purposes. The first is found in Psalm 22:1b where the Hebrew Masoretic Text reads "my cries of anguish," (NABRE) while the Peshitta follows the Greek in reading "the words of my wrongdoing." This reading caused difficulties for the Christological interpretation.¹⁸ Dionysius bar Salibi, for example, follows the Greek patristic tradition in asking, "If he had not taken hold of the person of mankind, how do these (words) fit the Son? For 'he did no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.'" (1 Pet. 2:22)¹⁹

21 (22 TM), [David, Jesus, and Queen Esther, Research on Psalm 21 (22 Masoretic Text)] ed. Gilles Dorival (Paris-Louvain: Peeters, 2002), 13–25.

14 Willem Bloemendaal, *The Headings of the Psalms in the East Syrian Church* (Leiden, 1960), 42. Unless otherwise indicated all translations from the Syriac are my own.

15 Denha, Mingana Collection Manuscript 58, folio 57 recto and Bloemendaal, *The Headings of the Psalms*, 42.

16 Robert W. Thomson, *Athanasiana Syriaca, Part IV: Expositio in Psalmos* [Syriac Athanasius, Part IV: Exposition on the Psalms] (CSCO, 387; Scriptores syri, 167. Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1977), 14.

17 Alain G. Martin, "La Peshitta et la Syro-Hexaplaire," [The Peshitta and Syro-Hexapla] in *David, Jésus et la reine Esther, Recherches sur le Psaume 21 (22 TM)* [David, Jesus, and Queen Esther, Research on Psalm 21 (22 Masoretic Text)], ed. Gilles Dorival (Paris-Louvain: Peeters, 2002), 38.

18 For a survey of patristic commentary on this difficult verse see Gilles Dorival, "L'interprétation ancienne du Psaume 21 (TM 22)," [Ancient Interpretation of Psalm 21 (22 Masoretic Text)] in *David, Jésus et la reine Esther, Recherches sur le Psaume 21 (22 TM)* [David, Jesus, and Queen Esther, Research on Psalm 21 (22 Masoretic Text)], ed. Gilles Dorival (Paris-Louvain: Peeters, 2002), 225–314, here 271–272.

19 All citations from Dionysius bar Salibi are based on the critical text in Marjorie Helen Simpkin,

The second significant variant for our purposes is found in Psalm 22:30a where the Peshitta departs from the Hebrew and Greek (and Syro-Hexapla) by rendering the Hebrew Masoretic text "fat ones" (differently NABRE: "who sleep") with the Syriac word "hungry." The Syriac of Psalm 22:30 thus reads: "They will eat and prostrate themselves before the Lord, all of the hungry of the earth." The expanded (rubricated) portion of the East Syrian commentary of Denha applies the word "the hungry" to believers: "Those who hunger for mercy and for knowledge of God or for contrition."²⁰ Daniel of Tella, in the West Syrian tradition, glosses the Peshitta with a citation from the Beatitudes: "*They shall eat and prostrate themselves before the Lord, all the hungry of the earth*, i.e., as our Lord said, 'Blessed are those who hunger and etc.'"²¹ Bar Salibi, by way of contrast, comments on the Greek text (Syro-Hexapla) which, with the Hebrew, reads "fat ones": "*They shall eat and they shall worship*, i.e., the mystical provisions, that is, the divine doctrines, and when their mind has grown fat, they worship him."

Finally we may note that in the difficult text of Psalm 22:30b the Peshitta reads the first person possessive pronoun "my soul is alive for him," with the Greek and the Syro-Hexapla but against the Hebrew, which has the third person and a particle of negation: "he who cannot keep himself alive" (RSV). Bar Salibi comments: "*It is to him that my soul lives*, that is, in death my soul lives in Sheol, and there it proclaims and preaches him."

Psalm 22 in Syriac Liturgies

Psalm 22 is used in the traditional Syriac liturgies of the Syrian Orthodox and of the Maronites principally during the celebration of the Lord's Passion on Good Friday.²² In the Church of the East Psalm 22:26 is used as part of an anthem at the beginning of the offertory of the Mass.²³ Psalm 22 is also used in the office of the Church of the East, where it is found in the first Marmyatha of the third Hulala.²⁴

"The Psalm Commentary of Dionysius Bar Salibi," (2 vols; Ph.D. diss., University of Melbourne, 1974). I have occasionally employed readings in the manuscripts Paris Syriac 66 (A.D. 1354) and Harvard Syriac 130 (A.D. 1888). The translation generally follows Simpkin, with some revisions. I have also consulted the translation by Walter Robert Roehrs, "Bar Salibi on the Psalms," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1937). Roehrs based his translation on Mingana 152 (A.D. 1891).

- 20 Denha, Mingana 58, folio 59 recto. As will be explained below, the "expanded (rubricated) portion" of this commentary consists of later additions that provide spiritual interpretation.
- 21 Daniel of Tella, Mingana 147 folio 21 recto, from a photograph in Simpkin, "The Psalm-Commentary of Dionysius Bar Salibi," 2:617.
- 22 Edouard Courte, *Le psaume vingt-deuxième au point de vue ecdotique et de la forme ainsi qu'au point de vue messianique et dans la liturgie* [Psalm Twenty-Two from Textual and Formal Points of View as well as from a Messianic Point of View and in the Liturgy] (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1932), 143.
- 23 John Alexander Lamb, *The Psalms in Christian Worship* (London, 1962), 53.
- 24 Lamb, *The Psalms in Christian Worship*, 66.

III. *Ps 22 in Syriac Biblical Commentaries*

Here I shall offer a brief review of the major extant Syriac commentaries on the Psalms.

Athanasiana Syriaca

A commentary attributed to Athanasius of Alexandria is extant in two Syriac forms, long and short.²⁵ The longer version (B.L. Add. 14568) is preserved in a damaged manuscript of A.D. 587. The shorter version (B.L. Add. 12168) dates from the 9th century. The exegesis in both forms of the commentary is very similar. Athanasius begins by relating the psalm title, which refers to “morning help,” to the incarnation, which freed humanity from darkness. It is Christ who sings this psalm in the person of all humanity. In the psalm Christ describes what happened to him at his crucifixion, prays on our behalf, and teaches us that we should pray in a similar manner. The commentaries do not make reference to David or offer an historical interpretation of the psalm’s original setting. Though originally composed in Greek, this commentary attributed to Athanasius was influential in the Syriac tradition and was used by later commentators such as Dionysius bar Salibi.²⁶

Daniel of Salah (6th century) and Daniel of Tella

The earliest extant commentary on the Psalms composed in Syriac is by the 6th century author, Daniel of Salah. The form of this work is homiletical but the biblical text is cited and commented on in a full and systematic way.²⁷

Daniel of Salah gives Psalm 22 a traditional Christian interpretation, seeing it largely as a prophecy of Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection by King David under the influence of the Holy Spirit. With regard to Psalm 22:19 (“they divided my garments ...”), for example, Daniel of Salah observes that the words of this

25 Robert W. Thomson, *Athanasiana Syriaca, Part IV: Expositio in Psalmos* [Syriac Athanasius, Part IV: Exposition on the Psalms] (CSCO, 387; Scriptores syri, 167. Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1977).

26 On the use of Athanasius by Bar Salibi see Stephen D. Ryan, *Dionysius Bar Salibi’s Factual and Spiritual Commentary on Psalms 73–82* (Cahiers de la Revue Biblique 57; Paris: Gabalda, 2004), 71–75.

27 David Taylor is currently editing the Syriac text of the commentary. I have read it only in part and in a partially legible British Library manuscript, AD 17187. A full analysis and comparison with the other commentaries discussed here will have to await the publication of the critical edition and translation of Taylor. Even a preliminary study of this text indicates that the later Syriac commentator Bar Salibi is heavily dependent on a form of Daniel’s commentary or on one of Daniel’s principle sources. See David G. K. Taylor, “The Manuscript Tradition of Daniel of Salah’s Psalm Commentary,” in *Symposium Syriacum VII*, ed. R. Lavenant (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 256; Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1998), 61–69.

verse need no commentary, for it is clear that God spoke them in advance as a prophecy of the passion.²⁸

Taylor has noted that one of Daniel of Salah's concerns is to combat the Phantasiast heresy which denied the corruptibility of Christ's body. With regard to Daniel's commentary on Psalm 22 Taylor writes, "Daniel is adamant that Christ's great suffering is proof that he died a natural death with all the usual consequences."²⁹

A shorter edition of this commentary, revised by an unknown author, is extant in several manuscripts, the earliest of which dates to the 16th century. This new edition not only abbreviates the original but adds new material. Several manuscripts ascribe this work to Daniel of Tella, and it is not clear whether this is intended to be a reference to Daniel of Salah or to another Daniel who was later confused with Daniel of Salah.³⁰

The form of the Daniel of Tella commentary is that of a brief lemma followed by a brief gloss. Most but not all of the verses are treated, with the longest discussion being given to v. 7 ("I am a worm and no man"). Psalm 22 is read Christologically as a prophecy about the coming redemption of Christ. Following Greek tradition, passages that do not seem appropriate for Christ are said to refer to sinful humanity. The psalm is not related to the life of David and little room is given to historical interpretation. At both the formal and thematic levels the commentary has much in common with Bar Salibi's spiritual commentary on the Peshitta. A comparison of this text with that of Daniel of Salah will have to await the publication of Taylor's edition.

Ishodad (9th century)

The East Syrian commentary of Ishodad of Merv comments on less than half of the verses of Psalm 22, with most lemmas followed by only brief glosses.³¹ The commentary follows the tradition of Theodore of Mopsuestia in reading Psalm 22 historically as a psalm about David persecuted by Absalom. In an extended introductory paragraph Ishodad cites the position of those who read the psalm Christologically and then offers two objections. The first is that some verses of the psalm are not appropriately applied to Christ. The second objection challenges the contention that in these same cases Christ speaks in the name of humanity. Ishodad responds that some verses are clearly spoken by an individual speaking

28 British Library Add. 17187 folio 63 recto-63 verso.

29 David G. K. Taylor, "The Great Psalm Commentary of Daniel of Salah," *The Harp* 11–12 (1998–1999): 38.

30 I have consulted the Daniel of Tella commentary in a copy of Mingana 147 (A.D. 1899) reproduced in Simpkin, "The Psalm-Commentary of Dionysius Bar Salibi," 2:617.

31 Ishodad of Merv, *Commentaire d'Ishodad de Merv sur l'Ancien Testament*, VI. *Psaumes* [Commentary of Ishodad of Merv son the Old Testament, VI. Psalms], ed. Ceslas van den Eynde, O.P. (CSCO 434; Scriptorum syri 81).

in his own name, and not as a representative of humanity in general. His basic argument then is that the prosopography must remain uniform throughout the psalm. Ishodad goes on to offer an explanation of why Christ cited this psalm from the cross. In short his position is that Christ cited the psalm for didactic purposes, to convince the Jews and to offer us an example of how we should pray in our sufferings.

What complicates the picture slightly is the final sentence: "But others (say): numerous prophecies were spoken of our Lord, even if in the meantime they were applied to others, as in the example of the cup and the building, which we have explained above."³² Here Ishodad refers to his theory of prophecy of double application. This seems at first glance to offer an opening to a strong figural reading in which the psalm would be taken originally to have referred to Christ, but to have been applied to others as well in the meantime, in this case to David. Thus the psalm would be read on both historical and figurative or Christological levels. Fortunately, Ishodad elaborates on his position elsewhere. In his commentary on Deuteronomy 18:15, the verse about raising up a prophet like Moses, Ishodad notes that some others hold that this text is a prophecy accomplished preliminarily in Joshua but perfectly in Christ. He then discusses Old Testament texts traditionally applied to Christ because they share a certain similitude. In this context he quotes five Old Testament texts, three of which are from Psalm 22 (vv. 2, 15, 18). He concludes: "Yet these texts do not envision our Lord alone, but as words they are appropriate to him and since they contain a similitude as to the events, their witness was applied to the economy of the incarnation."³³ Here we see more clearly that Ishodad follows Theodore of Mopsuestia in seeing in Psalm 22 a simple, accommodated sense. He does not envision a stronger figural reading in which the psalm could be said to be properly Christological.³⁴ Like Theodore, Ishodad limits the properly Christological psalms to four: Psalms 2, 8, 45, and 110.

32 Ishodad of Merv, *VI. Psaumes*, 51. The cryptic reference to the cup and the building refers to his discussion of Psalm 16:10, in which he follows Theodore of Mopsuestia in seeing here a prophecy of double application. The verse refers first to Israel, but "receives its true fulfillment in Christ, as Peter [Acts 2:25–31] also testified." See Ishodad of Merv, *VI. Psaumes*, 41.

33 Ishodad of Merv, *Commentaire d'Ishodad de Merv sur l'Ancien Testament, II. Exode-Deutéronome* [Commentary of Ishodad of Merv on the Old Testament, II. Exodus-Deuteronomy] ed. Ceslas van den Eynde, O.P. (CSCO 179; Scriptores syri 81), 16.7

34 I follow here Van den Eynde's analysis, Ishodad of Merv, *II. Exode-Deutéronome*, iv–v.

Denha (9th century)

The East Syrian commentary ascribed to Denha and Gregory is dated to the 9th century.³⁵ Mingana's catalog notes that the commentary is twofold.³⁶ The longer of the two commentaries, which follows the tradition of Theodore of Mopsuestia, is in black ink, and the shorter, interspersed, is in red ink. The material in red, which tends to include spiritual interpretation, seems to represent a later expansion of the commentary.³⁷ The treatment of Psalm 22 is lengthy and accounts for nearly every verse. As was noted above, the psalm title offers both an historical or Davidic setting in life and a Christological reading: "A prayer of David when he was being pursued by Absalom on account of his sins. Others, about Christ our Lord." The commentary itself is largely historical, applying the psalm verses to the life of David and his persecution by his son Absalom. Reference is made to Christ in the expansions, but mainly to indicate how the psalm was used by Christ and corresponds to the events of the passion, not to indicate that the psalm is itself explicitly prophetic. In sum, the commentary appears to be in line with East Syrian literal interpretation, while acknowledging a restricted and quite limited accommodated usage of and by Christ.

Dionysius Bar Salibi (12th century)

Dionysius bar Salibi, a bishop of the Syrian Orthodox Church who died in 1171, wrote three complete commentaries on Psalm 22. These were presented in parallel synoptic columns. The first is labeled literal or factual, and is based on the Peshitta. The other two are labeled spiritual.³⁸ Of these the longer of the two is based on the Syro-Hexapla version of the Psalms (from the Greek) and the shorter one on the Peshitta (from the Hebrew).

Bar Salibi's short factual commentary is similar to Ishodad's commentary in format and in thematic content, but shows clear verbal dependence in only one verse.³⁹ With the East Syrian tradition, he understands the psalm to refer to David pursued by Absalom. The commentary makes no mention of Christian doctrine and avoids making any direct application to the life of the reader. David is portrayed as a faithful man of prayer unjustly persecuted.

35 I consulted the commentary in a microfilm copy of Mingana 58, which was written in A.D. 1895. I am grateful to Professors Luk Van Rompay and Clemens Leonhard for providing me with this text.

36 Alphonse Mingana, *Catalogue of the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts, Vol 1: Syriac and Garshuni Manuscripts* (Cambridge, 1933), 158–60.

37 Bloemendaal, *The Headings of the Psalms*, 7.

38 On the terminology see Ryan, *Dionysius Bar Salibi's Factual and Spiritual Commentary*, xviii n. 14 and 27–28.

39 For a discussion of Bar Salibi's sources in his commentaries on Psalm 22 see Simpkin, "The Psalm-Commentary of Dionysius Bar Salibi," 1:76–77.

Bar Salibi's spiritual commentary on the Syro-Hexapla is the longest of the three. Nearly every verse is given a comment, with some verses given several alternative interpretations. Here Bar Salibi uses a number of sources of Greek origin, chief among them Athanasius and Eusebius of Caesarea. It is not clear in what form he had access to these sources, but my own supposition is that he had access to a Palestinian catena of Greek origin in Syriac translation. It is Bar Salibi's use of sources deriving from Greek which explains the fact that his commentary is based on the Greek text.⁴⁰ Even within this commentary, however, some of the lemmas agree with the Peshitta against the Syro-Hexapla. The psalm is read Christologically from start to finish with no mention made of the life of David. Passages that are not fittingly applied to Christ are said to be spoken in the name of humanity.

What is most striking about the rhetorical form of the commentary is the constant appeal to the reader as a member of the Body of Christ. Repeatedly we read that Christ came for us, suffered for us, and rose for our sake. Equally striking are the numerous references to the mysteries of the Christian faith: Trinity, Incarnation, Virgin Birth, Redemption, the Cross, Resurrection, the Descent into Hell, Original Sin, Satan, the holiness of the Church, prayer, and the call of the Gentiles. While the treatment that each of these themes receives is fleeting, the overall effect is to relate the biblical text to the truths of the faith such that one is given a strong impression of the overall coherence of the divine plan. In Catholic tradition this coherence is known as the analogy of faith (*analogia fidei*), and Church documents on Scripture indicate that the recognition of this fundamental coherence is one of the essential elements of Catholic Biblical interpretation.

Bar Salibi's spiritual commentary on the Peshitta is considerably shorter. As in the spiritual commentary on the Syro-Hexapla, the psalm is given a thoroughly Christological reading with no mention being made of David. Scripture is cited more often in this commentary than in the other two, though the citations are in the form of brief glosses. Rhetorically this commentary contains less of the direct appeal to the reader that so marks the commentary on the Syro-Hexapla.

Bar Salibi's commentaries were often transmitted in abbreviated versions. Berlin 188 [Sachau 218], dated to A.D. 1847, contains such a shortened version.⁴¹ In this commentary only a few of the verses are cited, and the commentary takes the form of extremely brief glosses. The approach is spiritual, but the text is so abbreviated that it bears little resemblance to either of Bar Salibi's spiritual commentaries.

⁴⁰ Ryan, *Dionysius Bar Salibi's Factual and Spiritual Commentary*, 52.

⁴¹ On this text see Eduard Sachau, *Die Handschriften-Verzeichnisse der königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin* [Manuscript Catalog of the Royal Library of Berlin] (Berlin, 1899), 2:609–12; see also Ryan, *Dionysius Bar Salibi's Factual and Spiritual Commentary*, 104–105.

Bar Salibi also wrote a fairly complete commentary on the New Testament. Though my investigation thus far has been limited to the genre of Psalm commentaries, I shall briefly consider Bar Salibi's commentary on Matthew in so far as it offers a commentary on Psalm 22. In commenting on Matthew 27:35 Bar Salibi notes that the dividing of the garments took place "to fulfill the prophecy of David," that is, the prophecy contained in Psalm 22.⁴² His commentary on Matthew 27:46 is more extensive and includes a lengthy discussion of the dereliction on the cross and of the varying Christologies of the Arians, those he refers to as the Nestorians, the Chalcedonians, and his own community, the Syrian Orthodox. In the course of this discussion he cites Psalm 22 several times. The rhetorical style is reminiscent of his Syro-Hexapla commentary, with frequent reference to Christ's action for us, on our behalf, for our sakes. In the following excerpt he comments on the opening words of the psalm and deftly links them with a verse from the end of the psalm by way of composing a response to Christ's prayer to the Father:

He cries out for us, for he saw to what ruin our generation would come. Again, because of this the Son asks the Father, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (v. 1) Let us listen to what is written in this psalm. It speaks as if from the person (*prosopon*) of the Father when it says, "For this reason I forsook you, that you should suffer and that you should be crucified, in order that they shall remember and shall turn toward the Lord, all the ends of the earth." (v. 27)"⁴³

This analysis is quite different than anything found in Bar Salibi's Old Testament commentaries on Psalm 22. In this commentary on Matthew he sees the psalm at once as giving voice to Christ's prayer and at the same time providing the Father's response to that prayer. Bar Salibi uses Psalm 22 itself to provide the words of the Father's response to the Son.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, I will briefly suggest several areas in which the tradition of Syriac Old Testament commentary might contribute to the project of a more theologically relevant exegesis. But first, I would add this caution. If part of my findings are negative, that is that the Syriac tradition of Psalm commentary appears to have little that is unique, that cannot be found elsewhere in the Greek, Latin, Coptic, Ethiopic, or Armenian traditions, this may reflect the limitations of the present study rather than the objective reality. It is entirely possible, for example, that there are genuine elements of the kind of rich typological interpretation so characteristic

42 Dionysius Bar Salibi, *Dionysii bar Salibi commentarii in evangelia II/1* [Dionysius bar Salibi Commentaries on the Gospels II/1], ed. Arthur A. Vaschalde and Jean-Baptiste Chabot (CSCO 95, 98; Louvain, 2d ed. 1953), 95.

43 Bar Salibi, *Dionysii bar Salibi commentarii in evangelia II/1*, 134.

of Ephrem, Aphrahat, Jacob of Saroug, or Jacob of Edessa that are preserved in Syriac Psalm commentary that have escaped my attention.

Syriac Old Testament Commentary and Vall's "Method C" Approach

Gregory Vall's 2002 article in *The Thomist* contained what he called "a Method C attempt to describe the organic connection between the psalm in its Old Testament context and Jesus' quotation of it from the cross (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34)."⁴⁴ He reads Psalm 22 as a prayer of the afflicted (in Hebrew: *anawim*), that prepares Israel, by God's providential role in the development of *anawim* piety within Israel, for the eschatological kingdom of God. In using this psalm Israel participated, by prophetic anticipation, in Christ's passion. Christ prayed this psalm, in an ultimate act of *anawim* piety, as the true Israel who embodied Israel's unique filial relationship to God.⁴⁵ Vall suggests the possibility that Jesus prayed this prayer not only for himself but as a proclamation of his identity and of the significance of his death on the cross.⁴⁶ That is, he prayed it entrusting himself completely to God with all his Israelite brethren and the clans of the nations in mind. As Bar Salibi would say, he offered himself completely to the Father for our sake.

My survey of Syriac Psalm commentary has found nothing that would make a substantive contribution to Vall's central thesis. I would note simply that Vall's attempt to articulate what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls "the unity of God's plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart," accomplishes in a modern and historically sophisticated way many of the same things that patristic commentaries did in a very different way.⁴⁷

Where I think the Syriac tradition can aid Vall's Method C interpretation is in giving a fuller and more balanced picture of Method A (that is, of patristic and medieval interpretation). Vall states, for example, that the Method A approach reads Psalm 22 in a way that was exclusively Christological. It demonstrated no desire to locate the psalm in an Old Testament context. He notes briefly the Antiochene tradition but states that Diodore and Theodore were condemned as heretics. Perhaps Bar Salibi's widely circulated and influential commentary containing one factual and two spiritual commentaries in parallel columns, which in its very format proclaims that this and all the psalms are patient of both an historical and a Christological reading, would help to give a slightly more accurate sketch of Method A, the patristic approach. Early Christian attempts to preserve a Davidic life-setting for Psalm 22 were not quite as fleeting or as marginal as Vall suggests, at least when the Syriac tradition is included in the discussion. This

⁴⁴ Vall, "Psalm 22," 178.

⁴⁵ Vall, "Psalm 22," 196.

⁴⁶ Vall, "Psalm 22," 197.

⁴⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2d. ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 112.

being said, we must also add that Christian historical interpretations of Psalm 22 are by no means limited to the Syriac tradition.⁴⁸ We may say only that in Denha, Ishodad, and Bar Salibi the tradition was alive and well and is preserved to our day.

In *Fides et Ratio* [Faith and Reason] John Paul II recalled that the Church reflects on Revelation “in the light of the teaching of Scripture and of the entire Patristic tradition.”⁴⁹ While consideration of the entire Patristic tradition is not always possible or practical, the fact that the Syriac patristic tradition is becoming increasingly accessible and familiar to theologians will help ensure that the Church’s reflection on Revelation is not limited to the Greek and Latin traditions.

A final area in which the Syriac tradition could make a contribution is in the example Bar Salibi and others give in commenting not only on the Masoretic text of the Hebrew but on the Septuagint and Peshitta as well. Contemporary critics generally use the versional evidence only to establish the earliest Hebrew text. For Bar Salibi, the Greek, the Hebrew, and the Syriac Old Testament versions were treated equally as authentic texts, each worthy of commentary.⁵⁰ The contemporary hegemony of the Masoretic or a critically established Hebrew text of the Old Testament is a relatively new and, in my opinion, somewhat problematic development in Catholic theology. The sources of this modern development can be traced to renaissance Humanism, to Reformation doctrines of inspiration, and to the Protestant sensibilities with which the historical-critical method has traditionally been practiced. The late Dominique Barthélemy, O.P., who devoted most of his scholarly life to the establishment of the critical Hebrew text of the Old Testament, called repeatedly for the recognition of a Christian Old Testament in two columns: one containing the Septuagint of the first centuries of our era, the second the Hebrew text canonized by the scribes of Israel.⁵¹ While it is not

48 Dorival (“L’interprétation ancienne du Psaume 21 (TM 22),” [Ancient Interpretation of Psalm 21 (22 Masoretic Text) 268] cites evidence from Didymus the Blind on Ps 22:30c indicating “that the tradition that centered itself on Christ gave a certain value to the purely historical interpretation of the Antiochene tradition.”

49 Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* [Faith and Reason], Encyclical Letter on the Relationship of Faith and Reason (September 14, 1998), 8, available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html.

50 I do not mean to suggest that Bar Salibi is by any means unique. Jerome, for example, commented on both Greek and Hebrew lemmas in his Old Testament commentaries as well; on Jerome’s practice see Adrian Schenker, O.P., “Septuaginta und christliche Bibel,” [The Septuagint and the Christian Bible] *Theologische Revue* 91 (1995): 461.

51 Dominique Barthélemy, O.P., “La place de la Septante dans l’Église,” [The Place of the Septuagint in the Church] reprinted in D. Barthélemy, *Études d’histoire du texte de l’Ancien Testament* [Studies in the History of the Text of the Old Testament] (OBO 21; Fribourg, 1978), 126; see also Adrian Schenker, O.P., “L’Écriture Sainte subsiste en plusieurs formes canoniques simultanées,” [Holy Scripture Subsists Simultaneously in Several Canonical Forms] in *L’interpretazione della Bibbia nella Chiesa, Atti del Simposio promosso dalla Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede* [Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, Acts of a Symposium Sponsored by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001), 178–186, and the expanded German version of Schenker’s article,

possible to develop this suggestion in the present context, Catholic exegesis should take seriously the role that these early translations have had in forming Christian culture and should not exclude their unique readings or commentary on the basis of a narrow doctrine of inspiration.⁵² An encouraging sign in this direction are the several translation projects now underway to provide fresh English translations of the Septuagint and the Peshitta. Equally encouraging is the decision in the first volume of "The Church's Bible" to provide complete English translations of the Vulgate and Septuagint texts for each verse discussed.⁵³ A fine example of how the treasures of the biblical versions and the patristic tradition can be exploited in popular commentary can be seen in Pope John Paul's recent commentaries on the psalms and canticles of Morning Prayer. There the Pope occasionally cites interpretation of the Psalter based on the text of the Vulgate and the Septuagint alongside of his comments on the Hebrew text.⁵⁴

"Die Heilige Schrift subsistiert gleichzeitig in mehreren kanonischen Formen," [The Holy Scriptures Subsists Simultaneously in Several Canonical Forms] in *Studien zu Propheten und Religionsgeschichte* [Studies on the Prophets and the History of Religion] ed., Adrian Schenker (Stuttgarter Biblische Aufsatzbände 36; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2003), 192–200.

- 52 There is ample support in ecclesial documents to defend the use of the ancient versions, even when it is clear that for modern biblical translations the original texts are to be used. *Dei Verbum* [The Word of God], Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, (November 18, 1965), 22 (in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. Northport, NY: Costello, 1987, 762–763), for example, refers to the honor with which the Church holds these versions even while going on in the next sentence to call for translations to be based on the original texts: "For this reason the Church, from the very beginning, made her own the ancient translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint; she honors also the other Eastern translations, and the Latin translations, especially that which is called the Vulgate." The recent instruction *Liturgiam authenticam* [Authentic Liturgy] Fifth Instruction on Vernacular Translation of the Roman Liturgy, (March 28, 2001), 41 (in *Liturgiam Authenticam*, Fifth Instruction on Vernacular Translation of the Roman Liturgy, Latin-English Edition, Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2001), suggests a similar concern for preserving the riches of the biblical versions: "... other ancient versions of the Sacred Scriptures should also be consulted, such as the Greek version of the Old Testament commonly known as the 'Septuagint', which has been used by the Christian faithful from the earliest days of the Church. ... Finally, translators are strongly encouraged to pay close attention to the history of interpretation that may be drawn from citations of biblical texts in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and also from those biblical images more frequently found in Christian art and hymnody."
- 53 Ricahrd A. Norris, *The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators*, The Church's Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).
- 54 Pope John Paul II, *Psalms & Canticles of Morning Prayer* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 2004). Examples of the Pope's use of spiritual readings based on the Vulgate and Septuagint can be found on p. 94 (Ps. 150:1), p. 108 (Ps 43:4), pp. 177–178 (Ps. 96:10), and pp. 189–190 (Ps. 86:2).

Brian Daley on Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms

In the same year that Vall's article appeared, Brian Daley, S.J. published an article entitled, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?: Reflections of Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms."⁵⁵

Daley listed six characteristics of early Christian interpretation of the Psalms: (1) the conviction of the present reality of God; (2) the presumption of a unified narrative (3) the use of the rule of faith; (4) the view of Scripture as a diverse, yet unified whole; (5) the conviction that scriptural texts have their own historical meaning, yet are meant for us; and (6) the understanding of the Scriptural text as mystery.⁵⁶

While Daley cites examples from the Greek and Latin tradition, these same characteristic features are shared by the Syriac tradition, in part because the Syriac tradition was in contact with and indebted particularly to the Greek Christian tradition. This being said, we can ask if the Syriac tradition can add anything unique? My brief survey does not find any distinctive elements of Syriac exegesis that cannot be found elsewhere, other than the unique format of Bar Salibi's commentary. His is the only Christian commentary to present factual and spiritual interpretations in parallel synoptic columns. This format suggests a hermeneutic that could be useful for Method C exegesis⁵⁷, but nowhere does Bar Salibi articulate such a hermeneutic in explicit terms.⁵⁸

Although Daley does not refer to Method C exegesis as such, he does suggest the need for a new branch of biblical studies, one that would be explicitly theological.⁵⁹ His vision for that new branch of biblical studies is decidedly ecumenical:

55 Brian E. Daley, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, eds. Ellen Davis and Richard Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

56 Daley, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?" 194–204.

57 Again, Method C draws on the strengths of both the patristic-medieval exegetical approach (Method A), and the modern historical-critical approach (Method B), while remaining cognizant of the shortcomings of both.

58 On Bar Salibi's understanding of the purpose and rationale for composing three commentaries and the relationship between the factual and spiritual commentaries, see Ryan, *Dionysius Bar Salibi's Factual and Spiritual Commentary*, 26–46. Bar Salibi's commentary contains a preface to the Psalter written by Moshe Bar Kepha, and this text comes close to an explicit articulation of the relationship between the factual and spiritual approaches.

59 While in sympathy with Daley on this point, it is important to avoid giving the impression that such a new discipline would retreat from the academic and scientific study of the Bible. It is useful in this context to recall John Paul II's words ("Allocution de sa sainteté le pape Jean-Paul II sur l'interprétation de la Bible dans l'Église," [Allocution of His Holiness Pope John Paul II on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church] 5, p. 7) about the dangers of "une sorte de dichotomie entre l'exégèse scientifique, destinée à l'usage externe, et l'interprétation spirituelle, réservée à l'usage interne" [a type of dichotomy between scientific exegesis destined for external use, and spiritual interpretation reserved for internal use]. That Daley himself does not envision such a dichotomy is clear, for he speaks about such a new branch of biblical studies being created by the academic establishment and having "parallel authority in the 'guild.'" (Daley, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?" 215).

"Christian exegesis must not only become more theological but more theologically ecumenical, if it is to nourish the Church."⁶⁰ The rich ecclesial diversity of the Syrian exegetical tradition could certainly make a contribution to achieving this goal of a more theologically ecumenical exegesis. Bar Salibi's use of Ishodad of Merv as a source for his factual commentary is but one example of the ecumenical nature of the Syriac tradition. In this case Bar Salibi, a Syrian Orthodox bishop, incorporated much of the commentary of Ishodad, a member of the Church of the East, thereby, in a small way, helping to heal ancient divisions.

Daley concludes his article by noting that it is not clear to what extent increased familiarity with patristic biblical commentary can aid modern exegetes to develop a more theological reading of Scripture. He does suggest, however, that renewed contact with ancient Christian Psalm commentary is a promising place to begin. I have tried to show in this brief contribution that the Syriac tradition of Psalm commentary, though by no means unique, has distinctive and important features that should not escape the attention of scholars seeking to develop a more theologically relevant exegesis.

60 Daley, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?" 213.